

Behind the Mirror: Now We See Her, Now We Don't

By Anne Milano Appel

Recently, I was invited to speak at a panel discussion entitled “Les Belles Infidèles: Women & Translation, from the Margins to Midway” at the 2002 American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) Conference in Chicago. The moderator, Oonagh Stransky, posed a number of intriguing questions regarding the role of female translators and what it means to be a woman translator in today’s world. In thinking about the theme, I was especially piqued by her reference to the “historical marginality of women” and her question “Don’t women always have to translate?”. Instinctively, I felt that the answer was, yes—indeed we do, all the time—but in what ways? The more I thought about it, the more I began to see the *belle infidèle* in several roles reflecting issues that, while not necessarily unique to women, are possibly more problematic for them. Specifically, I saw her (us!) as a kept woman, a sensualist, an exorcist, a paradox, and finally as a “translation” of herself.

The Kept Woman

In thinking about the *belle infidèle* as a “kept woman,” there is a certain irony in the fact that the very activity that allows creativity and provides a path to an alternate self also makes economic independence difficult, if not impossible, for her. There is frequently a tradeoff between the economic dependence that often results from practicing her craft and the independence that the financial security of a more lucrative profession would bring her. Consider the protagonist of the novel *Lost in Translation* by Nicole Mones.¹ Alice, a translator living and working in China, considers herself an independent woman, yet she is dependent on checks from her father to make ends meet. The

demeaning reality of the situation shames both of them to the point that neither father nor daughter ever mentions the checks that he regularly sends her to keep her afloat.

In *Possessions* by Julia Kristeva², Gloria Harrison is a gifted translator, yet it is her family’s wealth that gives her status. “Gloria was a woman,” we are told, “Not a ‘mere’ or ‘poor’ woman, because she was wealthy, or rather her family was. But all the same she was just a woman, a translator...”

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On a personal level, I never fail to be amazed by the way a particular Italian publisher perceives women translators. He seems to count on the classic female posture of compliance and doles out jobs (and euros) accordingly. A charming, elegantly dressed man of youthful middle age, he has made it clear to me over and over again that, in his eyes, we are merely dilettantes, dabblers. We don’t need to work since we are supported by a husband (or in the case of a female writer whose work I translated, by her brothers). If confirmation were needed to support the fact that the publisher in question is not an isolated case, a colleague recently confided to me that at a well-known school for translators in Italy, the professors routinely told their female

students (who made up the majority of those enrolled) that the best thing they could do to ensure their success was to find a husband.

We are, in short, viewed as “kept women.” Our work is valued differently than that of men, who are traditionally seen as the ones supporting a family. Woman translators are often taken less seriously. As the police detective in *Possessions* puts it: “Any woman who wants to survive has to prostitute herself in some way...One solution is for her to act as if she has a vocation and hide behind the rules of her profession...”⁴

Is being a translator lowly work, then? Alice’s fictional lover seems to think so: “She was so intelligent, so perceptive. Why had she not aimed higher?” he wonders. Alice herself seems to share this sense of devaluation, of diminishment: “...at thirty-six she was little more than a go-between. She’d done nothing she could call her own.” In *Transgressions* by Sarah Dunant, the translator Lizzie, trying to get her life together after the breakup of a long-term relationship, accepts the job of translating a long, hard-boiled thriller by a new Czech writer only because she feels she has nothing better to do with her life: “...though she had reservations about its originality, she’d decided to do it anyway, partly because the money was good and partly because living in another language would allow her to live less in herself, or at least the self that she associated with Tom. ...Its translation would take her the rest of the year and into the new one. Why not? She had nothing better to do with her life...”⁶

Clearly, the effects of being a “kept woman” can be devastating to one’s work as well as to one’s self-esteem. Lizzie’s own sense of self-worth has been badly damaged: “As a

translator she had the confidence to do wonders with other people's words, but was still too often wrong-footed when it came to finding her own."⁷ Similarly, a female writer "kept" by her brothers after the dissolution of her marriage (to an older man who had also "kept" her) recently moved to a place of her own and rejoiced at her newfound independence. She wrote to me that for two years she had been living a "suspended" life under her brothers' roof. Though their care was well-intentioned, the paternalism that surrounded her resulted in total writer's block. With matters unresolved, her days unsettled, her entire life was up in the air. Completely dependent on her brothers, she lost her "voice" and was unable to write a word.

The Sensualist

What of the *belle infidèle* as a sensualist? It is a common belief that the best way to learn a language is by having a love affair with a native speaker of that language. The act of translation goes beyond this, allowing the translator to have a love affair with the author's words. There is a certain connection between passion and language, between erotic experience and the physical manipulation of words. Words appeal to the senses and have a voluptuous quality. Their suggestiveness is able to express a thousand shades of yearning and desire which reverberate intellectually and emotionally. Moreover, the beauty of words is matched by their power. With the right words, anything can happen. The translator's appreciation for words is based on her belief—conscious or not—in their transformational power, their ability to influence.

On one level at least, translation is all about seduction and attraction: the translator finds herself drawn to the

language and attracted to the text. In love with words and the intricate new worlds they create, she is seduced by the foreign language and this brings her pleasure. Gloria in *Possessions* is well aware of this phenomenon. When the story opens with the discovery of her decapitated body, the narrator explains: "There was nothing missing except the head. 'My sexual organ,' as she laughingly used to call it, referring to the cerebral pleasure she got out of her work as a translator..."⁸ A similar sexual chemistry is even more explicitly at work with Lizzie in *Transgressions*. Having seduced and raped her would-be rapist, she becomes emboldened. While earlier she lacked the confidence to fashion with her own words the magic and wonder she was able to create with other people's words, she soon finds her own voice, to the extent that she begins altering the original text and creating her own scenes! For Lizzie, it is a disturbingly erotic experience: "The words flowed like genital juices."⁹

In the novel *The Translator* by John Crowley, another fictional translator, Kit, reflecting on her work translating the poetry of Falin, her professor, also comes to realize the connection between sensuality and language: "She thought, long after, that she had not then ever explored a lover's body, learned its folds and articulations, muscle under skin, bone under muscle, but that this was really most like that: this slow probing and working in his language, taking it in or taking hold of it; his words, his life, in her heart, in her mouth too."¹⁰ Falin, too, seems to be well aware of the association between love and language. When Kit asks the transplanted Russian poet why he should have to choose between writing in English or writing

in his native tongue, his reply is: "I don't know. It may be that languages are like lovers. You can have more than one at a time. But perhaps it is possible to love only one at a time."¹¹ For Kit, the translation process itself is steeped in yearning and aspiration. As Falin recites one of his poems to her, she longs to understand, though she is able to recognize only a few words of Russian: "She bent her soul toward his voice as though she might be able to translate what he said by will alone, or by desire."¹²

Anecdotal reports from practicing translators confirm that, like their fictional counterparts, they have also experienced the sensual aspects related to translation.¹³ A colleague, for example, recounts that upon completing the translation of a novel, she found herself in love with the protagonist! Not in the sense that she admired the way the character had been created and depicted in all of his many nuances. Instead, she had actually fallen in love with the man who had begun to live a life of his own independently from the pages of the book. After weeks of living in close, intimate contact with him in order to render the subtle meanderings of his mind, his habits, his tics, his passions, and addictions, she was no longer able to do without him "physically" (her word). She was heartbroken when it came time to submit the translation to the publisher and had to leave him.

A male colleague wrote that a book he translated by a particular woman author was so steeped in her "femaleness" that he had to first translate from one gender to another before he could translate from her language to his. He felt as though she had written the book "with her life and with her genital organs." After the book was published, he had

occasion to meet the writer at a dinner party at her home. Their meeting was eerie. He felt at once as if he knew her in a way that no one else knew her, not even her husband. The feeling of intimacy was so intense between them that, had they made love together, the impact could not have been more compelling. The words and glances they exchanged, the few minutes they spent alone together, confirmed his sensation that he was not mistaken in his impression, that she felt it too, and that the book—now *their* book—was evidence of a secret complicity between them.

This complicity or intimacy attendant on the act of translation is perhaps the inevitable result of coming to know the “other” on such close terms. In *Le Ton Beau de Marot*, Douglas Hofstadter talks about “identity-blurring” or “empathy”: “the ability to project oneself into another’s life...to absorb inside oneself another person’s way of being.”¹⁴ In the chapter entitled “On the Ununderstandable,”¹⁵ he explains that “when two people live together intimately...each imbibes the other’s point of view, and over a period of years, another person’s way of looking at the world has become *internalized*.”¹⁶ To illustrate this internalization or “interpenetration of souls,” he cites Mrs. Miniver’s conundrum: “She saw every relationship as a pair of intersecting circles of the same size, which had to overlap to just the right degree, not too much and not too little.” With the optimal amount of overlap, “the *center* of each circle is located inside the other circle.” Taken metaphorically, this means that the “I” becomes “we,” that the very core of each person is incorporated into the other person until the two are merged, blurred, fused.¹⁷ Hofstadter is referring to a

reciprocal understanding that is, above all, intralinguistic, and the image is especially suggestive when applied to translation.

Mark Musa, in the “Translator’s Note” to his translation of the *Divine Comedy*¹⁸, refers to this complicity as “being a good lover.” By this he means that a translator of Dante “should do what Jackson Mathews recommends to the guild of translators in general—‘be faithful without seeming to be’....” He notes what Mathews adds in regards to this type of faithfulness: “a translator should make a good lover.” What does it mean to be a good lover? Musa explains that Dante’s translator should be as faithful as possible and not call attention to himself, that he should read and reread what he is translating, that he should read the lines aloud to hear their rhythm and movement—in short, that he should listen carefully to Dante’s voice and presumably internalize it.

The Exorcist

The *belle infidèle* as exorcist uses the act of translation as a kind of incantation or charm: a spell invoked to drive out certain personal demons. Indeed, at times translating a book can have a cathartic effect, provoking certain emotions and feelings that, while painful, may be therapeutic and liberating; a little like a session with an analyst. I felt this impulse toward exorcism very strongly as I translated a volume of stories by Italian writer Isabella Messina. Indeed, it was Oonagh Stransky’s reading of my translation of Isabella’s *The Face*¹⁹ which led her to invite me to be on her panel at the ALTA conference referred to earlier. She said she felt “uncomfortably familiar with the torment of the woman character and her relentless other.”

I felt this same discomfort and eerie sense of familiarity while translating many of Isabella’s stories, most especially so with *Beasts*, in which the female protagonist, worn out and emotionally numbed by an unfeeling brute of a husband, stonily deals with the situation in a very unique way. The fictional construction of female identity in this story represents both a flight from a reality that is unbearable, as well as a struggle to create a new reality and identity. Having come to know the writer personally, I understand that Isabella was dealing with her own personal demons when she wrote this story, exorcising the malign spirit of a marriage better ended.

The fictional translator Alice is also exorcising her own particular demons. Her work allows her to escape to China, leaving behind a past which is excruciating to her. Here, too, there is a fictional construction of female identity: a struggle between a remembered past and a newly formed present persona. At one point, Alice tries to imagine a world without her father: “His dominance, his paternalism, vanished. Would she be free then? Could she be herself?”²⁰ Later, she tries to explain wanderlust, the lure of the open road, to her Chinese lover. “I’m a wanderer...” she tells him. It was “A free feeling. Leaving her old life behind. Becoming herself.”²¹

The ability to exorcise one’s demons is made possible by living the lives of others. For the *belle infidèle* who is trying to expel the spirits of a painful past (or an unbearable present), translation becomes more than a craft or a profession. It becomes a way of being, a way to safely explore and try on other lives without committing to them. But how safe is this really? As she engages in

the *métier* of living the lives of others, the translator risks becoming an imposter, a sham. Moreover, as she comes face to face with the many different lives, real or imagined, that inhabit the pages of her books, these fragments of lives she lives often threaten the very core of her personal identity. The greater the pretense, the more fragmented she becomes. In a sense, the ability to place herself in different situations, to identify with other personas, and to try on other lives makes the translator a kind of versatile playactor in a screenplay written by someone else. A screenplay to which she gives voice through her performance. The words she writes are hers, but they have been conceived by someone else and reflect another person's thoughts. Where does that leave her?

The Paradox

The *belle infidèle* as a paradox connotes a certain ambivalence, as well as contradictory aspects in what she is and what she does. For example, in the process of translating, is she giving birth or devouring? While it is true that women have traditionally played the role of caretaker, facilitator, and enabler, is the *belle infidèle* enabling a new text or consuming the original?

The idea of translation as giving birth is an obvious metaphor. There is a certain nurturing quality to the act: the female principle is at work as a new work is born. We recognize the life force in the accomplishment of re-creation, and experience the entire range of the maternal process, including gestation, birth, and even a post-partum sense of emptiness and loss when a translation is finally completed and turned over to an editor. But there is also the idea of devouring, consuming, as the original work is swallowed up by the translator and

absorbed into the translation. In a presentation given at ATA's Annual Conference in St. Louis in 1999, Adriana Pagano cited the Mexican poet Eduardo Lizalde, who used the image of the tiger to describe the translator. Like the tiger, the translator lurks near her prey, then devours it. These two aspects are not necessarily antithetical. Rather, they are more like two sides of the same coin: the translator as both "mother" and "devourer," "creator" and "destroyer."

Another paradox concerns the provisionality, multiplicity, and ironies of identity. The *belle infidèle* does not attain a coherent, centrifugal identity: tensions and complexities remain. The only constant is multiplicity and variance. This tension is apparent in the case of another translator, Elizabeth I of England. As queen and even before that as a young child, Elizabeth's position of power was tempered by ambivalence and the uncertainties surrounding that power. David Starkey points out in his biography²² that Elizabeth's early attempts at translation were aimed at gratifying those in power in her life. "Intelligent, always eager to please," Elizabeth translated into English a French religious poem for her stepmother, Catherine Parr, when she was only 11 years old. The following year she translated a religious treatise by her stepmother as a New Year's gift for her father. Perhaps in recognition of the primacy of Henry's power, and to court his favor, she undertook a more demanding task—translating the treatise from English (her mother tongue) into not one, but *three* foreign languages: Latin, French, and Italian. In another biography, Alison Weir states that "like most educated gentlewomen of her day, Elizabeth was encouraged to become the equal of men in learning...."²³ Was her translation an

attempt, then, to compensate for being a woman? Did even a queen have to prove herself in a man's world? Whatever the reason, we are told that Elizabeth continued translating to the end of her life.

A "Translation" of Herself

Seen in this role, the *belle infidèle* is, metaphorically speaking, a revision or "translation" of her former self. There is a reinvention of the self as she moves toward and becomes subsumed in the "other": the other author, the other language, and the other culture. The metamorphosis is reminiscent of the tradition of becoming a "new man" by relocating to a different place or adopting a new set of principles (Dante's "*vita nuova*" comes to mind), except that in this case, the change involves language rather than locale or morality.

The *belle infidèle* as a "translation" is a chameleon capable of changing color and adapting to decontextualization. Is this an attempt to correspond to the timeless female posture of compliance and acquiescence? Does it bespeak conformity, submission, deference, or is it a more proactive form of role playing? The latter, I think. By engaging in a form of rewriting or re-creation, both of the original text and of herself, the translator attempts to find a new voice. This goes beyond the usual task of the translator, which is generally acknowledged to be that of giving the writer a voice.

For Mones' Alice, translation is indeed a way of finding a new voice. It is a door to an alternate self, allowing her to escape from a former identity to one which suits her better: "Here in China the self could always be reinvented. She, too, could become someone else. Or so she'd told herself all these years."²⁴ In

fact, her desire to reinvent herself startles a Chinese interlocutor at one point: "This woman actually wanted to be Chinese!" he exclaims.²⁵ It is also puzzling to the American archaeologist who is her client: "She could feel his stare, but there was no use explaining. He'd never understand the safe, settled feeling it gave her to be a foreigner in China, an outside person, barely tolerated. The way the geometry of her world seemed righted here, all weights and balances, all retributions, called into play."²⁶

In *The Translator*, there is a new twist: the author "translates" himself into the translator. Kit becomes a "translation" of the Russian poet himself. Falin's aspiration is to pass on "Not his poems into other poems... [but rather] himself ...into another poet. ...So then it was he who was truly the translator."²⁷

Speaking is tied to the culture and leads to recognition and acceptance by that culture. Because she is able to speak their language, Alice is accepted by the Chinese even though she is an "outside person." Indeed, at times she even becomes her interlocutor, adopting the local patois like a chameleon.²⁸ She can't help replaying the accent of the person she is speaking with.

Commonality of language provides a certain comfort and security, a sense of belonging. Italian dialects are an example of this. Though much has been written about their gradual disappearance as a result of standardization, nationalism, and the global village (first TV and now the Internet), most Italians speak both standard Italian and their local dialect. Dialects are still spoken within the family and within one's circle of friends precisely because they define an in-group and create a sense of belonging.

Alice feels this sense of belonging, yet has her doubts: "There was a certain security in it. One always knew where one was, in the group. *Is this my group?* she thought for the thousandth time. China. The Chinese."²⁹ There is a certain ambivalence to all of this in that reinvention, becoming part of a new group, can lead to a loss of self. Alice tells an old friend, a long-time expatriate like herself: "You know I am *not* an American, not anymore, not really."³⁰ Gloria in *Possessions* found herself in similar circumstances before her death. Though she had won some public success, the narrator reflects on "...what a mess Gloria's life had been. Like that of so many women...I knew she was hated, a foreigner [in the mythical town of Santa Varvara], almost a writer."³¹

For the translator, being bilingual and bicultural is a dual-edged sword. It can mean recognition and acceptance by the other culture, but it can also mean dualism and dichotomy. The displacement of the mother tongue and of one's cultural identity, social traditions, and shared memory—all the things which make up the self—can lead to a divided self, a distancing from the true self. When Alice unconsciously adopts the accent of her Chinese lover Lin Shiyang, he asks: "Ah, so you mirror me. And where is the real you?" "Behind the mirror" is her reply.³²

Still, perhaps one's identity is not defined by one's mother tongue. Perhaps one can become a "translation" of oneself. Adriana Pagano, in her presentation referred to earlier, also cited Hector Bianciotti, an Argentinean writer born of Italian parents, whose home dialect (he was from Piedmont) was displaced by two foreign languages: first Spanish, then French. Bianciotti writes: "I don't think one's mother tongue is fatally linked to one's

identity; you can feel at ease in another tongue. I feel better in French." On a personal note, I can identify with this. For communicating some things, I feel better in Italian. Once, at a reception following a program at the Italian American Museum in San Francisco, I overheard an interesting exchange between my sister and my husband, neither of whom speak Italian. Not realizing I was listening, my sister commented to my husband that it was as though I had become a different person as I circulated among my Italian friends, chatting in Italian. She said my whole personality seemed different! Had I reinvented myself? Had I (temporarily, at least) become a "translation" of myself? I'll have to think about that....

Notes

1. Mones, Nicole. 1999. *Lost in Translation*. New York: Random House.
2. Kristeva, Julia. 1998. *Possessions*. New York: Columbia University Press. Translated from the French by Barbara Bray.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
5. Mones, op. cit., p. 316.
6. Dunant, Sarah. 1997, 1998. *Transgressions*. New York: Regan Books, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
8. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 3.
9. Dunant, op. cit., p. 240.
10. Crowley, John. 2002. *The Translator*. New York: Morrow, William & Company, p. 183.

11. Ibid., p. 58.
12. Ibid., p. 164.
13. For the anecdotes that follow, the author is indebted to the contributors of the discussion list Biblit, an online forum for literary translators working to and from Italian, created and moderated by Marina Rullo.
14. Hofstadter, Douglas R. 1997. *Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*. New York: Basic Books, p. 485.
15. Ibid., Chapter 15, pp. 455-493.
16. Ibid., p. 479.
17. Ibid., pp. 480-481.
18. Musa, Mark. 1984. "Translator's Note: On Being a Good Lover." In Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 1: *Inferno*. New York: Penguin Classics, pp. 57-64.
19. Messina, Isabella. 2002. *The Face*. In *Beacons 7*, edited by Alexis Levitin. Literary Division, American Translators Association, v. 7, pp. 54-63.
20. Mones, op. cit., p. 192.
21. Ibid., pp. 305-306.
22. Starkey, David. 2000. *Elizabeth: The Struggle for the Throne*. New York: HarperCollins.
23. Weir, Alison. 1998. *The Life of Elizabeth I*. New York: Ballantine Publishing, p. 14.
24. Mones, op. cit., p. 249.
25. Ibid., p. 21.
26. Ibid., p. 76.
27. Crowley, op. cit., p. 279.
28. Mones, op. cit., p. 20.
29. Ibid., p. 121.
30. Ibid., p. 96.
31. Kristeva, op. cit., p. 12.
32. Mones, op. cit., p. 315. *ata*

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Peering Into a Mirror: Translator Perception of the Public's Awareness of Translators *Continued from p.23*

These efforts included impromptu interpreting for a policeman who had stopped a car full of Spanish speakers who were afraid of a roadside arrest (there is quite a difference between the way people feel about the police if they've grown up in Mexico as opposed to the U.S.) and volunteering to translate a parent notification published by the school district—a "letter in 'Spanish' that was almost impossible to understand!"

"Translators and interpreters who volunteer their professional services from time to time help tremendously," Carol reminds us. The school district

accepted the freebie translation. "They accepted my offer, the corrected version was sent out, and public response was noticeable." As a result, they now have everything that will be sent to the parents translated professionally. A similar transformation happened to the policeman, "who found out what it was like to have a professional interpreter. That police department has increased their demand for interpreting work since then."

Michelle Asselin, from Montreal, does much of the same client education as part of her daily work, although not on a volunteer basis. "In

Canada, as elsewhere, many bilingual people still believe they could become translators in a pinch, but my experience is that, in most cases, it is relatively easy to convince a new client that being able to converse the 'other' language and translating require different sets of skills. I believe that it is the translator's duty to 'educate' reticent or misinformed clients and explain that translators are not just 'people' who type in another language," and that ancillary work, such as desktop publishing, is not part of translation." *ata*

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